

Viral Meningitis (also called Aseptic Meningitis)

What is viral meningitis?

'Meningitis' means inflammation of the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. Viral meningitis can be caused by several different viruses. Most cases in the United States are caused by enteroviruses. Viral meningitis is usually less serious than meningitis that is caused by bacteria or fungi.

Who gets viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis can affect anyone. The disease is most often seen in infants and people whose immune systems are weak and are at higher risk for severe infection.

How is viral meningitis spread?

The spread of the virus depends upon the type of virus involved. Enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis, are most often spread through the stool of an infected person (such as when changing a diaper or not washing hands properly after using the bathroom). Viruses that cause meningitis can also be spread through the respiratory secretions of an infected person, such as by inhaling or touching droplets created when the infected person coughs or sneezes. Insects such as mosquitoes can also spread viruses that can cause meningitis. Contact with an infected person may increase your chance of becoming infected with the virus that made them sick, but your chance of developing meningitis as a complication of the illness is small.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

Symptoms of meningitis include the sudden onset of fever with headache, stiff neck, muscle aches, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and a general feeling of not being well. More severe symptoms include confusion, eye sensitivity to bright light, and seizures. Most symptoms last from 7 to 10 days. In babies, meningitis can be hard to identify. Babies with meningitis may have a fever, cry a lot, be hard to wake up, and refuse to eat. Depending on the virus, a rash may appear.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear three to six days after exposure.

How is viral meningitis diagnosed?

If meningitis is suspected, doctors will take samples of blood and/or fluid near the spinal cord and send them to the laboratory for testing. The laboratory will run tests on the samples to confirm that a virus is causing the meningitis. Doctors may also order tests to make sure that the patient doesn't have a more serious illness, such as bacterial meningitis, which can be more severe and require different treatment.

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What is the treatment for viral meningitis?

There is no specific treatment for viral meningitis. Treatment usually involves measures to relieve symptoms. Because the illness is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not useful for treatment and will not make the patient feel better. Most patients recover without treatment within about seven to ten days.

How can viral meningitis be prevented?

You can prevent the spread of the viruses that cause viral meningitis by:

- Washing your hands carefully and thoroughly with soap and water after using the bathroom or changing diapers;
- Covering your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing, and using disposable tissues to wipe your nose;
- Avoiding kissing or sharing food, drinks, eating utensils, lipstick, or other such items when you are sick;
- Washing objects and surfaces with a dilute bleach solution (made by mixing $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of chlorine-containing household bleach with 1 gallon water) to destroy the viruses that can cause meningitis;
- Avoiding bites from mosquitoes and other insects;
- Controlling mice and rats; and
- Making sure you and your child are vaccinated. Vaccinations included in the childhood vaccination schedule can protect children against some diseases that can lead to viral meningitis. These include vaccines against measles, mumps, and chickenpox.

How can I get more information about viral meningitis?

- 1) If you have concerns about viral meningitis, contact your healthcare provider.
- 2) Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/index.htm>.
- 3) Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/viral.html>.